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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TAIPEI 000365

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [TW](#)

SUBJECT: TAIWAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION COUNTDOWN: ONE WEEK
TO GO

Classified By: AIT Director Stephen M. Young,
Reasons: 1.4 (b/d)

¶1. (C) Summary: In a world of suspect and politicized polling, one prominent pollster gives KMT candidate Ma Ying-jeou a 26 point lead over the DPP's Frank Hsieh, while the KMT and the DPP internal tracking polls rate the contest as within 10 points. Most still feel the race remains Ma Ying-jeou's to lose, though Hsieh campaign leaders tell us their candidate still has a fighting chance. Hsieh will hope to gain ground from the blunder by four KMT legislators who forced their way into Hsieh's campaign headquarters building on March 12. The two candidates will participate in the final policy presentation event (quasi-debate) organized by the Central Election Commission the evening of March 14. Both the DPP and KMT are planning to hold their largest island-wide campaign activities on March 16. Each hopes to capitalize on the third anniversary of China's passage of the anti-secession on March 14, 2005 to energize supporters heading toward election day on March 22. With a week to go, we can expect more twists and turns in the parties' dash to the finish line. End Summary.

Polls Differ on Size of Ma's Lead

¶2. (C) A leading pro-KMT pollster's tracking poll shows KMT candidate Ma Ying-jeou leading the DPP's Frank Hsieh by 26 points as of March 13. Other pro-Blue media polls, which have significant technical flaws, also give Ma a wide lead. However, the Hsieh campaign's internal polling indicates the gap is less than 6 points, and some KMT officials have recently suggested a gap of 8-10 points (Septel).

¶3. (C) Former Foreign Minister Tien Hung-mao told the Director the race is still Ma Ying-jeou's to lose, though Tien acknowledged that it is difficult to assess the impact of the "one China market" issue with which Frank Hsieh is vigorously attacking the Ma-Hsiao campaign. Hsieh has been telling his own campaign staff that internal polling shows him only 3 or 4 points behind Ma, but Tien believes Hsieh may be trying to boost campaign morale, and the real spread closer to 10 points. At a DPP briefing for foreign representatives on March 10, International Affairs Director Bikhim Hsiao acknowledged Hsieh was trailing Ma, but by a

smaller gap than reported by the press. Hsieh has been gaining ground on Ma since the January legislative election defeat, but his campaign would have to hit a ninth inning "home run" to pull ahead, baseball fan Hsiao admitted.

Melee At Hsieh Campaign Headquarters: Taiwan's "Watergate?"

14. (C) The first significant confrontation in the campaign occurred on Wednesday afternoon, March 12, when four KMT legislators went to Hsieh campaign headquarters (with media and a semi-coerced Finance Minister Ho Chih-chin in tow) and tried to enter the candidate's personal office area on the 13th floor to investigate rumors the Hsieh campaign was being provided office space gratis by a government-connected financial institution. After failing to gain entrance to Hsieh's office area, the legislators proceeded to a lower floor where they were blocked in the elevator for half an hour by irate Hsieh campaign staffers, who called the police to report an illegal entry. The police escorted three of the legislators through an angry crowd to a police car, the fourth escaping in the Legislative Yuan (LY) bus that had brought them to the site. Legislator Alex Fai received a punch in the head en route to the police car. Under direction by campaign director Lee Ying-yuan (who was not present when the legislators first showed up), DPP staffers and supporters blocked the police car from leaving for two hours, insisting that a prosecutor come to the scene to investigate a "crime in progress." After the prosecutor arrived to receive the complaint against the legislators, the police car, whose front window had been smashed, was finally allowed to leave. The whole event received very extensive coverage by the media, especially television.

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15. (C) During an evening campaign rally on March 12 Hsieh condemned the act as an example of "one party dominance," saying it showed why citizens should be concerned about giving the KMT too much power, and urged voters to censure the KMT by voting for the DPP on March 22. Hsieh campaign manager Y.Y. Lee claimed the incident was "more serious than Watergate." The DPP ran full-page advertisements in all the major newspapers the following day that showed the legislators trapped in the elevator smiling as if they just committed a practical joke, with the headline reading "the insult is too hard to endure" (qiren taishen).

16. (C) Upon learning the facts of the incident, Ma urged people on all sides to remain calm and apologized for the conduct of the four legislators. Alex Fai, who led the foray, resigned as KMT caucus secretary general that evening, and today (March 14) resigned from the KMT. In addition to holding press conferences and issuing statements of apology, the KMT suspended the membership rights of the three other legislators on March 14. Both Blue and Green evening talk shows have focused heavily on the incident and related developments. A joke going around town says that "two bullets" (i.e., the gunshot wounding of President Chen and VP Lu) cost the KMT the 2004 presidential election, while "four morons" (the KMT legislators) may cost the party the 2008 contest.

17. (C) KMT Sec-Gen Wu Den-yih told AIT on March 13 that the legislators' stunt has given the DPP a golden opportunity to paint the KMT as arrogant and could cost Ma several percentage points at the presidential polls. However, Wu maintained, the DPP's image has also been tarnished because someone in the crowd punched Fai and others smashed a police car windshield during the incident. Still, Wu told us that this was just the kind of mistake the KMT could not afford to make at this late stage of the game. Although the incident has damaged the KMT, contacts on both the Green and Blue side have told AIT that Ma has dealt better and more expeditiously with this crisis than the previous problems he has encountered.

KMT Decides to Boycott DPP, But Not KMT, Referendum

18. (C) Prior to the March 12 incident, KMT Chairman Wu Poh-hsiung announced that the KMT Central Standing Committee had voted to boycott the DPP UN referendum while supporting its own referendum proposal. In a nod to such key players as Taichung Mayor Jason Hu and KMT Honorary Chairman Lien Chan and other referendum opponents, the party announced it would "understand and respect" the decision of those supporters who chose to boycott both referenda in order to avoid being politically manipulated by the DPP government. Wu explained that the KMT will run media ads calling on voters to support the KMT referendum and boycott the DPP referendum. Wu also stated that the KMT will continue its support for passage by the Legislative Yuan (LY) of a resolution calling for Taiwan participation in the UN and other international organizations. (Comment: This widely expected KMT decision to urge supporters to boycott the DPP's UN referendum makes the chances of passing the first threshold (participation by 50 percent of eligible voters) increasingly remote. Its equivocal position on its own version, however, gives the DPP a chance to question the KMT's commitment to "Taiwan identity." End Comment.)

19. (C) Tien Hung-mao said he does not expect the UN referenda to pass. He finds this regrettable, since Beijing is likely to exploit the measure's failure to claim falsely that Taiwan's people do not care about joining the UN. Tien acknowledged, however, that USG pressure on the UN referendum issue had been appropriate and necessary. Bihim Hsiao stressed that Hsieh, if he wins, would be cautious in interpreting the UN referendum in the unlikely event it passes on March 22. Hsieh would present the referendum as an expression of the Taiwan people's desire for greater participation in the international community, and not a change in the national title or step toward de jure independence.

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Last Presidential Debate on Friday

110. (C) Friday evening, March 14, the two candidates will participate in the final session of a series of three policy presentation events (quasi-debates) organized by the Central Election Commission (CEC). The candidates will have two turns (15 minutes each) to present their policy views; there is no question-and-answer component. Hsieh, the underdog, may try to challenge Ma over the recent incident at his headquarters involving KMT legislators and Ma's cross-strait common market concept. Political observers suggest that most voters have already made up their minds on the candidates and doubt that this final debate will have much impact on the race.

Major Rallies Planned for Weekend

111. (C) Both the DPP and KMT will hold large-scale island-wide rallies on March 16, taking advantage of the third anniversary of China's passage of the anti-secession on March 14, 2005, to energize supporters and boost enthusiasm going into the final week before election day. The DPP hopes to mobilize one million people for its event, which will feature afternoon marches starting at 3:14 p.m. between 200 points spaced at 5 km intervals along the length of north-south highways on the west and east coasts. Participants will walk counter-clockwise, turning their caps backwards, to symbolize "reversing the tide." Slogans for the march are: "Say no to one-party dominance, say yes to checks and balances; say no to Chinese hegemony, say yes to joining the UN; say no to the common market, say yes to job security." Lee Ying-yuan explained to AIT that the DPP event

will be upbeat, and he said the DPP is hiring helicopters so that the media can get impressive shots of the island-wide event. Hsieh, who will be at the march starting point in Taitung at sunrise, will walk a short distance in the afternoon, and he will attend an evening rally in Taichung City.

¶12. (C) To try to dampen the effects of the DPP event, the KMT will hold its own series of marches and rallies in major cities also in the afternoon of March 16 with the theme of "Taiwan moving forward," urging voters not to give the DPP another chance to keep Taiwan back. The marches will start at 3:00 p.m., with participants stopping at 3:14 p.m. to reverse their caps and make a "V" sign with their hands. Next, participants will chant "oppose dirty tricks" at 3:19 p.m., symbolizing the incident on March 19 (2004) when President Chen and VP Annette Lu suffered minor wounds from an apparent assassination attempt while campaigning in Tainan. Many KMT supporters continue to suspect the shooting was a trick staged by Chen to win the 2004 presidential election. The marchers will converge on points throughout the island and hold a series of afternoon rallies. Ma and other KMT leaders will participate in a large evening rally in Tainan City.

Comment

¶13. (C) Both parties will use their March 16 activities, the largest of the campaign, as pep rallies to boost enthusiasm and turnout on election day. In 2004, one important factor in President Chen's victorious reelection bid was a highly successful island-wide rally that the DPP held on February 28. During the final stage of the race, the Hsieh campaign will continue to play up the intrusion at its headquarters by KMT legislators to underscore its theme that a too powerful KMT will run amok unless it is checked by a DPP president. Continued KMT damage-control efforts make clear that Ma and other party leaders realize the serious consequences this issue could have in the final stage of the election campaign.

YOUNG